

THE CHARACTER OF THE ANABAPTISTS

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The following is from chapter VIII, A History of the Baptists, Volume 1, John T. Christian, Bogard Press, 1922 --

It is amazing how many names were applied, in the period of the Reformation, to the Baptists. They called each other brethren and sisters, and spoke of each other in the simplest language of affection. Their enemies called them Anabaptists because they repeated baptism when converts came from other parties. This name Anabaptist is a caricature. It damns first by faint praise and then by distortion. "The opprobrious term 'Anabaptist' was and is a vile slander. It was invented to conceal thought. It shrouded in a fog the grand ideals of a people loving peace and truth. The term is even yet a pellet of wax on the object glass of a telescope. The tendency of history is to change front, but the most historiographers still look at the whole question through corrugated glass" (Griffis, the, Anabaptists. In The New World, 648. December, 1895).

They were called Catabaptists because they denied infant baptism and practised immersion. The name Baptist dates from the earliest days of the Reformation. In contemporary literature they are generally called Baptists (Frank, Chronik, III.198). It is an old and honored name.

The extent of the Baptist movement in the sixteenth century can scarcely be exaggerated. "This malady of Anabaptism and fanaticism," says Dorner, "had, in the third and fourth decades," that is between 1520 and 1540, "spread like a hot fever through all Germany; from Swabia and Switzerland along the Rhine to Holland and Friesland; from Bavaria, Middle Germany, Westphalia and Saxony, as far as Holstein" (Dorner, Geschichte der protestantischen Theologie, 132. Munich, 1867).

Anabaptism represented in the sixteenth century the stream of popular thought, feeling and aspiration, which has not ceased to flow through the centuries. Had it not been for fierce persecutions, which from the beginning fell upon the Baptists, in all human probability the Reformation would have been distinctly a Baptist movement. In that event the character of the Reformation would have been far more thorough and spiritual, and the battle for human liberty would not have been delayed for ages. But the leaders of the Reformation feared for their prerogatives and the rulers for their thrones, and these two forces combined to defeat any show of human freedom. The masses of the people, however, were with the Baptists.

The novelty and boldness of the doctrines of the Baptists literally filled with terror the rulers of the world. Many of the leaders were scholarly men well versed in Greek and Hebrew. The wholesale slaughter of the Peasants, in 1525, caused the spread of Anabaptism, in the next twenty-five years, all over Europe. Cities and districts which had been friendly to Luther went over to the Anabaptists, and thousands of trades-men were to be counted as their adherents.

(Guy de Bres, *Racine, Source et Fondement des Anabaptistes*, 5. Ed. 1555). The Archbishop of Lund, Imperial Ambassador with the King of Rome wrote July 9, 1535, that while thousands of them had been killed "there is a great quantity of this sect in several parts of Germany" (State Papers of Venice, V.29). Albertus Hortensius writing, in 1548, affirms: "The Anabaptists have increased with marvelous rapidity in all places" (Hortensius, *Tumultum Anabaptistarum*).

Thousands were baptized by Hubmaier, and other Baptist preachers in Switzerland, Moravia, Germany, the Netherlands, and other countries. Frank says:

"The course of the Baptists was so swift that their doctrines soon spread over the whole country, and they quickly obtained a great body of adherents, baptized many thousands and also drew to their side many well-meaning souls. They were thrown into prison. tortured with branding sword, fire, water, and divers imprisonments, so that, in a few years, some two thousand or more are estimated to have been put to death" (Franck, *Chronik*, III. 198).

So much has been said about the Baptists being turbulent and fanatical, that it is really a surprise to many when it is found, that they were the most peaceful of men. That there were many persons called Anabaptists who were fanatics there is no doubt. When it is remembered, however, that the worst of outrages were committed against them, and that they were hunted like wild beasts, that their women were outraged, that they were drowned in rivers and burnt at the stake, that every means of exasperation was used against them, we are only surprised that they were as moderate as they were. Had the cause of these revolutionists succeeded they would have been regarded as the most brilliant champions of liberty, and they would have been classed among the world patriots. Since they failed they have been counted the worst of reprobates. It has been shown also that most of the fanatics were not Anabaptists at all, and that the contention in which they were engaged was far more political than religious.

The Baptists were peace lovers and did not believe in the use of the sword. This trait would probably describe the most of them. They were reviled and they reviled not again, they were persecuted and they pleaded for liberty of all. It is pleasing to note that their true worth has been appreciated. Pierre Bayle, 1648-1706, the learned encyclopaedist, Professor of Philosophy at Rotterdam, tells of the mild character of the Baptists, and of their long list of martyrs. He says:

"Could it only produce those who were put to death for attempts against the government, its bulky martyrology would make a ridiculous figure. But it is certain that several Anabaptists, who suffered death courageously for opinions, had never any intention of rebelling. Give me leave to cite an evidence, which cannot be suspected; it is that writer (Guy de Bres) who has exerted his whole force in refuting this sect. He observes that its great progress was owing to three things: The first was, That its teaching deafened its hearers with numberless passages of Scriptures. The second, That they affected a great appearance of sanctity. The third, That their followers discovered great constancy in their sufferings and death. But he gives not the least hint that the Anabaptist martyrs suffered death for taking up arms against the state, or stirring up rebellion" (Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, I. 287 note).

Georgius Cassander, who lived in those times, and disputed with the Anabaptists and visited some of their ministers in prison, in his Epistle to the Duke of Cleves, gives a good reputation to the Baptists of Belgium and Lower Germany. He says:

"They discover an honest and pious mind; that they erred from the faith through mistaken zeal, rather than from evil disposition that they condemned the outrageous behaviour of their brethren of Munster; and that they taught that the kingdom of Jesus Christ was to be established only by the cross. They deserve, therefore, to be pitied and instructed, rather than to be persecuted" (Cassander, Praefat. Tractet de Baptismo Infantium).

The Roman Catholic Pastor at Feldsberg, A. D. 1604, says:

"Among all of the sects none had a finer appearance and a greater external sanctity than the Anabaptist Among themselves they call each other brother and sister; they curse not, they revile not, they swear not, they use no defensive armor, and at the beginning had no weapons. They never eat or drink immoderately, they use no clothes that would indicate worldly pride, they have nothing as individuals but everything in common. They do not go to law before the magistracy and endure everything in patience, as they pretend, in the Holy Spirit Who then would believe that under these garments lurk pure ravening wolves?"

The character of the Swiss Baptists has the highest commendation of Erasmus. In the time of their persecution in Basel, Erasmus lived in that city. He remarked upon the persecuting desire of those who had themselves just escaped from danger and declared:

"They who are so very urgent that heretics should not be put to death. did yet capitally punish the Anabaptists, who were condemned for much fewer articles, and were said to have among them a great many who had been converted from a very wicked life, to one as much amended; and who, however, they doted on their opinions, had never possessed themselves of any churches, or cities, or fortified themselves by any league against the force of princes, or cast any one out of his inheritance or estate" (Epistolarum de Erasmus, XXXI. 59. A. D. 1530).

On account of these statements Bellarmine accused Erasmus of being of the Baptist persuasion. No one could express a favorable opinion of the Baptists and escape abuse.

Dr. Schaff has summed up his opinion of the entire movement of the Reformation. Luther, of all the Reformers, arouses his enthusiasm. With a patriotic interest he narrates the story of his countryman, Zwingli. For Calvin as a theological genius he had a high admiration, but he pronounced him to be "one who forbids familiar approach". To Dr. Koslin he wrote (1888): "I am now working on the Swiss Reformation, but I cannot stir up as much enthusiasm for Calvin or Zwingli, although he is my countryman, as for Luther." About the same time he wrote to Dr. Mann:

"The Reformation everywhere had its defects and sins, which it is impossible to justify. How cruel was the persecution of the Anabaptists. who by no means were only revolutionary fanatics but for the most part simple, honest Christians and suffered and died for liberty of conscience and the separation of church and state. And how sad were the moral state and the rude theological quarrels in Germany. No wonder that Melancthon longed for deliverance from the rabies theologorum. I hope God has something better and greater in store for His Church than the Reformation" (Schaff, *The Life of Philip Schaff*, 462).

Earnest and evangelical as were the Baptists it would seem natural to suppose that they would at least be tolerated by the government. But their views were too radical, and their principles too far reaching, to fail to challenge the hatred of that persecuting era. The whole Christian world was organized upon lines of persecution. The only exception to the rule were the Baptists. They held that every man had a God-given right to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience; and the larger right that other men had the same privilege. In this contention they stood absolutely alone; and standing alone they paid the price in human blood in order that every man might worship, or not worship, God according to the dictates of his own conscience. It was a costly sacrifice, but it was none too dear for the world's redemption

The entire Christian world was engaged in persecution. The Baptists, in all lands, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, were cruelly persecuted by imprisonment, exile, torture, fire and sword. The Baptists by thousands were martyred. They alone pleaded for liberty. "The principles from which the Anabaptists proceeded," says Emil Egli, "manifested a powerful grasp on original Christian ideas" (Egli, *Die Zurischer Wiedertaufer*, 94. Zurich, 1884). Their voice on the subject of liberty of conscience was clear and distinct. Hans Muller, of Medicon, when brought before the Zurich magistrates, said:

"Do not lay a burden on my conscience, for faith is a gift freely from God, and is not a common property. The mystery of God lies hidden, like the treasure in the field, which no one can find, but he to whom the Spirit shows it. So I beg you, ye servants of God, let my faith stand free" (Egli, 76).

Balthasar Hubmaier, in a tract published at Schaffhausen, in Switzerland, included the Turks and atheists in his plea for the rights of conscience. He says:

"The burning of heretics cannot be justified by the Scripture. Christ Himself teaches that the tares should be allowed to grow with the wheat. He did not come to burn, or to murder, but to give life, and that more abundantly. We should, therefore, pray and hope for improvement in men as long as they live. If they cannot be convinced by appeals to reason, or the Word of God, they should be let alone. One cannot be made to see his errors either by fire or sword. But if it is a crime to burn those who scornfully reject the Gospel of Jesus Christ, how much more it is a crime to burn the true expounders and exemplars of the Word of God. Such an apparent zeal for God, the welfare of the soul, and the honor of the church is a deception. Indeed to every one it

must be evident that the burning of heretics is a device of Satan" (Hubmaier, Von Ketzern und verbrennen. A.D. 1524).

The Baptists appealed directly to the New Testament as the sole authority in matters of religion. They at once repudiated the traditions of the Fathers and appeals to earthly councils, and chose the Scriptures as the rule of faith and practice. They believed in the personal interpretation of the Word of God and that a man must walk according to the light which is in Him. An important feature of the Baptist movement was its strange atmosphere of Bible reading, almost to the exclusion of other literature. This was also characteristic of the earlier evangelical movements, but not to the same extent as among the Baptists of the Reformation. There had been more than one translation of the Bible into German before Luther's time. The Baptists used with great power their heritage of the Waldensian Bible, and they hailed with delight Luther's translation of the Bible. Their own leaders, such as Hatzer and Denck, translated the Scriptures out of the originals into the vernacular of the people. Among the skilled artisans, journeymen and better situated peasants of the early sixteenth century, there were not a few who could read sufficiently to make out the text of the German Bible, whilst those who could not read would form a circle around those who could, and the latter, from the coigne of intellectual advantage, would not merely read, but would often expound the text after their own fashion to their hearers. These informal Bible readings became one of the chief functions among Baptists (Bax, Rise and Fall of the, Anabaptists, 163-165. London, 1903).

The Baptist movement was radical in its nature, but the baptismal question was secondary in its importance. The movement involved the entire reconstruction of the State Church and of much of the social order. It was nothing less than revolutionary. THE REFORMERS AIMED TO REFORM THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH BY THE BIBLE; THE BAPTISTS WENT DIRECTLY TO THE APOSTOLIC AGE AND ACCEPTED THE BIBLE ALONE AS THEIR RULE OF FAITH AND PRACTICE. The Reformers founded a popular State Church, including all citizens and their families; the Baptists insisted on the voluntary system and selected congregations of baptized believers, separated from the world and the State (Schaff, History of the Christian Church, VII. 72). They preached repentance and faith, they organized congregations, and exercised rigorous discipline. They were earnest and zealous, self-denying and heroic. They were orthodox in the articles of the Christian faith.

Hast says:

"To realize regeneration among men was the Anabaptist aim, and if they failed, the noble and exalted thought which animated them, and for which they strove, must not be depreciated. They have deserved in this particular the respect of an unprejudiced later age, before a thousand others; and they seem in the choice of means to attain this end, to have been generally worthy of respect. It was not so much the advocacy of the doctrine of regeneration that was so noticeable and characteristic of them, but the fact that they held on so hard for its realization. They stood in their consciousness much higher than the world about them, and, therefore, were not comprehended by it" (Hast, Geschichte der Wiedertaufer. 144. Munster, 1836).

This praise by the German historian is none too high. The nature of the church was the fundamental contention of the Baptist movement of the Reformation.

The Baptists could find no trace of infant baptism in the Bible, and they denounced it as the invention of the pope and the devil. Baptism, they reasoned, presupposes instruction, faith and conversion, which is impossible in the case of infants.

Voluntary baptism of adults and responsible converts is, therefore, the only valid baptism. They denied that baptism is necessary to salvation, and maintained that infants are, or may be, saved by the blood of Christ without water baptism (Augsburg Confession, Article IX). But baptism was necessary to church membership as a sign of conversion.

From this conception of baptism followed, as a sequence, the rebaptism of those converts who wished to unite with the Baptists from other bodies.

The two ideas, a pure church of believers and the baptism of believers only, were the fundamental articles of the Baptist creed.

The administration of the affairs of the congregation was exceedingly simple. Through baptism one entered into the fellowship of the believers. Each congregation had its own leader called teacher or pastor who was elected by the congregation. If death or persecution removed him a new man was immediately elected to take his place. Besides these there were persons selected to take care of the poor and competent persons were sent out as missionaries. The duties of the pastor were to warn, to teach, to pray in meetings, to institute the breaking of bread, and to represent the church in withdrawing the hand of fellowship. On Sunday the congregation came together to read the Word of God, to exhort one another and to build one another up in Christian doctrine. From time to time the Lord's Supper, which they termed the breaking of bread, was celebrated (Cornelius, *Geschichte des Munsterischen Aufruhrs*, II.49).